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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 04 RIYADH 001270

SIPDIS

DEPT PASS TO NEA/ARP FOR BMCGRATH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/09/2018

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CIA](#) [EU](#) [EUN](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [PGOV](#)

PHUM, PREL, PTER, SA, SP

SUBJECT: SAUDIS FIND THEIR VOICE ON INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

REF: A. RIYADH 1209 (NOTAL)

[1](#)B. RIYADH 1218

[1](#)C. RIYADH 1170

[1](#)D. RIYADH 1162

[1](#)E. RIYADH 1133

[1](#)F. RIYADH 1090

[1](#)G. RIYADH 1070

[1](#)H. RIYADH 1035

[1](#)I. NEW YORK 555

[1](#)J. MADRID 799

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Classified By: Charge' d'Affaires Michael Gfoeller for  
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Public opinion on religious tolerance in Saudi Arabia continues to develop in the wake of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz's Madrid Conference on Interfaith Dialogue. Senior SAG officials railed against the USG's lack of public support after the Conference concluded. Conservative Saudis see the Conference as serving the West's interests, but not the Kingdom's. Moderates remain positive, signaling that the King may have successfully nudged a large swath of public opinion his direction. The King's image as a proponent of tolerance is weakened by the lack of religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. Attention now turns to the proposed special UN session on dialogue, requested by King Abdullah and called for in the Madrid Conference declaration. END SUMMARY

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SAUDI FRUSTRATION WITH LACK OF USG RESPONSE  
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[1](#)2. (S/NF) Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Adel al-Jubeir had previously expressed great disappointment at the absence of any high-level USG endorsement or public statement on the initiative on the part of the White House or the Department (Reftel A). Al-Jubeir had relayed his comments to the

Charge' from Morocco where he was vacationing with the King. The Charge' and Ambassador Al-Jubeir were discussing the Taif Christians (Reftel B) when Al-Jubeir asked, "Why press us on this and refuse to acknowledge when we do the right thing in Madrid?" Al-Jubeir emotionally noted that he found the lack of public USG support for the King's initiative in support of inter-religious tolerance difficult to comprehend, since the point of the dialogue was to "advance the agenda the U.S. has always been advocating" and "to promote your values." He emphasized that the U.S. has been pressuring the Saudis for years to take these steps. Now the King had appeared in front of the world and his countrymen to do exactly what the U.S. wanted him to do, but had not received any public USG support.

13. (S/NF) In a separate discussion the same day between Riyadh Pol Counselor and a senior Saudi MFA official, this same criticism of lack of USG support for the Interfaith Dialogue was again repeated. The MFA official added that the King wanted the next step in this initiative to be a special session on religious tolerance at the United Nations (Reftels I, J) and hoped the USG would actively support and participate with the SAG to have this session convened.

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CONSERVATIVES NOT SWAYED  
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14. (S/NF) Some Saudis reject outright King Abdullah's interaction with any other religious leader, regardless of the faith. Others accept as legitimate the King's public engagement with leaders of the other monotheistic religions (Judaism and Christianity), but oppose dialogue with Hindu or

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Buddhist leaders, who are considered heathens. Many Saudis view the initiative as a ploy to appease the West, particularly the United States. A Saudi contributor to the Aafaq news web site ([www.aafaq.com](http://www.aafaq.com)) published an article stating that "King Abdullah's meeting Buddhists and Hindus does not please religious clerics as they consider them pagan." The site Islam Today ([www.islamtoday.net](http://www.islamtoday.net)) concentrated on the invitation of Jewish rabbis, quoting a Saudi official as saying only rabbis from outside Israel would be invited. A conservative Saudi expressed his fear that, were a similar conference held in the Kingdom, Israelis would be invited. A Saudi female in the education field described the Interfaith Dialogue as "only another attempt by the Kingdom to please the U.S. and to cleanse itself of the accusations of terrorism and extremism."

15. (S/NF) A Jeddah-based Shiite scholar, who himself praised the SAG's "new approach" as "a good idea," shared views on conservative resistance. The scholar relayed comments by what he called a well-known conservative radio journalist. The journalist stated that the only way to deal with Muslims from other sects, or people from other religions, is for them to convert and become Muslims "like them" (i.e. Sunnis of the Wahabi tradition). Per the scholar, the journalist criticized those participating in the Madrid conference, calling them "liars" and "not good Muslims." The scholar said the Saudis need help to stop this type of thinking, and added that he does not yet see any change in Saudi society.

16. (C) Moderate Saudis continue to support the King, but without the vigor displayed by conservative opponents. Posters identifiable as Saudis commented on an Al-Jazeera article praising the King. "Dialogue is very necessary and it is concordant with God's words," wrote one. Another posting struck at the heart of Saudi Arabia's credibility, asking, "Does this conference mean that if a Buddhist or Hindu promoted his religion in Saudi Arabia, it would be allowable or would he be arrested? I think this is hypocrisy because there is no religious freedom in Saudi Arabia."

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17. (C) Media analysis of the Interfaith Dialogue held in Madrid on July 16 continues, even though the event occurred a month ago. On August 10, the moderate Arabic-language daily Al-Watan published an op-ed by Umaimah Ahmad Jalahimah, a female advisor to Shoura Council. In promoting the Madrid Conference, Ms. Jalahimah purports that the meeting was "not a submissive response to a call from the West," but instead was "inspired from our Holy Qur'an that encourages us to negotiate with followers of other religions." The Saudi-funded weekly Al-Majalla, a London-based pan-Arab news magazine, covered the Madrid Conference extensively in its August 3rd edition. The article quotes a range of credible Islamic leaders. The King's supporters reiterated the official message. "The conference puts one of the basic concepts in Islam, dialogue, into effect," stated Dr. Hasan Al-Ahdal of the Saudi-based World Muslim League.

18. (S/NF) Not all media opinion was fit to print. A writer and contributor to the newspaper Al-Bilad recounted an attempt to submit a story on the Madrid Conference. In his article, he criticized leaders of the conservative Islamic community, citing the Saudi Judiciary head Salih Al-Haidan (strictly protect) for not attending the Interfaith Dialogue. The writer argued that good Muslims support their government and in choosing to not attend the Conference, they were opposing the King's initiative and setting forth a bad example for Muslims in the Kingdom. However, he stated that

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the paper's editor-in-chief refused without explanation to publish the article. He added that many Saudis consider the dialogue a good idea but do not believe it is feasible to implement within the country.

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INTERFAITH DIALOGUE AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH  
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19. (S/NF) The Australian DCM in Riyadh provided Pol Counselor a copy of a confidential cable sent to Canberra, titled "Saudi Arabia: Religious Tolerance: Madrid Inter-Faith Dialogue." The Australians conclude that the Madrid Conference demonstrated the King's opposition to extremism and portrayed "a more sympathetic and tolerant Saudi Arabia to the world and especially to its key ally, the United States." The Australians conclude that the lack of religious freedom in the Kingdom will undermine the credibility of the Interfaith Dialogue.

110. (S/NF) The Australian cable also details insight provided to the Australians by Bishop Paul Hinder (strictly protect), the Roman Catholic Bishop for the Gulf Region, who is based in Abu Dhabi and attended the Madrid Conference. Bishop Hinder was present in November 2007 when King Abdullah raised the idea of an interfaith dialogue with the Pope. According to this cable, the Pope responded favorably, but stressed that the dialogue should be matched with increased religious freedom in Saudi Arabia. The King did not reply to this point. Subsequent to this meeting, the Pope decided that the Roman Catholic Church would participate in the dialogue, but would not endorse it or jointly sponsor it without an improvement in religious freedom for Christians in Saudi Arabia. Bishop Hinder delivered this message to the Saudis in April, 2008.

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COMMENT  
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111. (S/NF) The Saudis' rebuke for lack of USG response came as a surprise. Based on the conversation with Al-Jubeir, we are sure that he was relaying the views of King Abdullah. The same message was delivered by another Saudi official on

the same day. From this we conclude that King Abdullah is disappointed with the lack of public USG support and feels left out on a limb, with the U.S. offering nothing in return.

The MFA official implied that the SAG wanted, or rather expected, USG support for a special session on religious tolerance at the UN.

¶12. (S/NF) The King's initiative has exposed him to significant political risks. Religious conservatives argue that he went too far; international observers criticize everything from the conference's location to its invitees. Al-Qaeda has renewed its death threats against him. In Saudi Arabia, the Interfaith Dialogue initiative has prompted a minor backlash. On June 5, SAG authorities in Eastern Province closed three Shia mosques at the same time the Mecca interfaith conference was being convened (Reftel G). An influential Saudi prince opined that the attempted deportation of sixteen Indian Christians (Reftel B) could have been carried out by those angered by the King's moves towards greater religious tolerance. Reinforcing this point is the fact that al-Qaeda called for the King's death shortly after the Madrid Conference concluded (Reftel C). We interpret these moves to mean that the King has struck the right chord, successfully challenging the paradigms of moderates and conservatives alike.

¶13. (S/NF) Despite the many criticisms, Saudis stand by the

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King and support his political balancing act. King Abdullah faces a challenge in implementing the provisions of the Madrid Conference Declaration (Reftel J). The King is already pushing the idea of a special UN session on dialogue, and the Saudis may seek further U.S. help to accomplish this.

Further tangible actions will show skeptical Saudis that the Interfaith Dialogue is more than just appeasement to the West.  
GFOELLER